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SIPDIS

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TAGS: PGOV PHUM PREL OSCE TU

SUBJECT: TURKEY'S SOUTHEAST: GROWING VIOLENCE THREATENS
(AGAIN) TO CUT OFF PEACEFUL DIALOGUE

REF: ANKARA 2500

Classified By: Adana PO Eric Green for reasons 1.4 (b), (d)

1.(U) This is a Consulate Adana cable.

2.(C) Summary: Even as PKK attacks on civilian and military targets in the southeast intensify, the latitude for debate of Kurdish issues continues to widen. Politicians and civil society representatives in Diyarbakir welcomed the more tolerant atmosphere, but expressed disappointment with the Kurdish nationalist DTP's inability to articulate a constructive vision since entering parliament in July. The strengthened AKP has renewed its efforts for EU-friendly human rights standards, but has thus far avoided any perception that it is responding to Kurdish demands.

Reactions to a September 29 massacre in Sirnak province that killed 13 pro-government village guards reveal the continued depth of distrust between many in the southeast and the government as some local leaders suspect dark forces within the Turkish security apparatus were responsible for the attack. End summary.

Pushing) and Crossing) the Boundaries

3.(C) During a two-day visit to Diyarbakir Oct 1-2, Adana officers met with a variety of government and party officials as well as civil society representatives and journalists. Most interlocutors were enthusiastic about the expanding opportunities for dialogue about the Kurdish issue, a trend reinforced by the AKP's July election victory and its commitment to push more democratic reform. The increasingly permissive atmosphere was evidenced by an international conference on September 29-30 in Diyarbakir that featured representatives from the DTP and other Turkish political parties, experts on other conflicts such as the Basque, prominent Turkish commentators and retired diplomats) people who until recently would not have agreed to meet in public. In one taboo-breaking presentation, columnist Cengiz Candar explicitly urged the GOT to negotiate with the DTP because it is linked with the PKK and is therefore in a good position to serve as a partner in launching a peace process. This is a telling reversal as members of the Turkish establishment typically cite the DTP's PKK connections as a reason to shun contact with the party.

4.(C) Despite such signs of progress, however, elements of

the GOT remain defensive; police officers visited some of the conference's foreign participants in their hotel demanding to see their passports and on October 1, conference speaker Sertac Bucak, the leader of HakPar, a tiny Kurdish party that has no ties with violence, was arrested and charged for remarks he made last year advocating a federal system in Turkey.

Gul Visit: Nice Gesture, But not a Breakthrough

5.(C) President Gul's early September visit to the southeast, including Diyarbakir (his first travel as President) was also welcomed as a signal of his administration's democratic instincts and possible interest in playing a more proactive role in the region. Local businessman Sahismail Bedirhanoglu, one of several civil society leaders who met with Gul, said he was impressed with Gul's informal, approachable manner and his willingness to listen. Diyarbakir mayor Osman Baydemir was also pleased that Gul visited and said Gul has potential to make great strides on the Kurdish issue. Baydemir said he urged Gul to rise above his past as an AKP minister and use the role of president as a "referee" who can intervene in disputes involving local parties, the government or the military.

AKP in the SE: Successful and Hungry for More

6.(C) The unexpectedly strong vote for the AKP in the southeast coupled with the election of 20 DTP deputies means that local political landscape is now dominated by rivalry between these parties. The competition is acute in the DTP's

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main stronghold of Diyarbakir, which PM Erdogan has already explicitly identified as a top target for the AKP in the 2009 municipal elections. In the weeks following the election there was speculation that the DTP and AKP would be natural allies on issues such as amending the constitution to reduce military influence on the GOT. In reality, the AKP appears loath to risk nationalist backlash by overtly cooperating with the DTP or making any declarations on the Kurdish issue.

Newly elected DTP Diyarbakir MP Gultan Kisanak complained to us that when DTP parliamentarians criticized the AKP program for government for not addressing the Kurdish issue, PM Erdogan lashed back, saying he would not engage with the DTP until it renounces the PKK. She joked that the DTP now enjoys better relations with the ultra-nationalist MHP than with the AKP.

7.(C) Diyarbakir mayor Osman Baydemir accused the AKP of remaining in "campaign mode" when it should tone down its nationalist rhetoric and build bridges with the DTP, which can help end the violence and serve as a partner in democratization efforts. Baydemir said he fears that the AKP's long-term goal is to push for greater democratization while ignoring Kurdish-specific demands for more cultural rights and political autonomy. This approach, he said, derives from the AKP viewing society through an Islamic lens, in which Kurds and Turks are all members of a single Muslim brotherhood. "They want us to remain silent and they think that after 20 or 30 years the problem will go away."

8.(C) In a separate meeting, Baydemir aide Siyar Ozsoy told us the AKP's standoffish approach to the DTP and the Kurds is completely understandable since the AKP faces fierce opposition to its reform plans from the military, nationalists and traditional secularists) all far more powerful lobbies than the Kurds. In this environment, he said it makes sense that the AKP is not eager to take on the Kurdish issue.

DTP: Stumbling Out of the Gates

9.(C) The AKP's aloofness from the Kurdish issue has been reinforced by the DTP's own dismal debut, which has disappointed its own supporters. Baydemir admitted that the DTP was unprepared for the elections and did a poor job of candidate selection. He encapsulated the problem, saying "we need to stop complaining and make some constructive proposals." Confusion and disorganization reign within the party, however. Baydemir's aide, Ozsoy, noted that the party has not yet formulated or articulated positions on core Kurdish issues, such as cultural/linguistic rights, administrative reform or policy towards Iraq. When asked what the party's key priorities were for the coming term of parliament, DTP MP Kisanak talked for five minutes about the process of constitutional amendment without addressing the DTP's goals for the new constitution. She then changed the subject.

10.(C) Seymus Diken, a prominent Kurdish writer who also serves as an advisor to Baydemir, told us that the DTP is in serious difficulties because of internal divisions. "A statement by one DTP official is often contradicted the same day by a competing statement," he said. A core problem, he said, is that the party is still being governed "from the east" i.e. from PKK camps in the mountains on the Turkish-Iraq border.

11.(C) NGO and business representatives, meanwhile, are disappointed that the DTP has not shown any interest in developing policies on socio-economic development, a glaring oversight for a party that represents the poorest constituents in the poorest region of the country.

Sirnak Massacre: PKK Terror or "Mystery Killing"?

12.(C) All the political leaders we met condemned the September 29 murder of 12 people, including several pro-government village guards, in Sirnak province, though Kurdish nationalists were quick to voice skepticism about the government's claim that the PKK was to blame. (The PKK

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denied involvement in the September 29 attack, but did acknowledge responsibility for the October 7 killing of 13 Turkish soldiers.) Baydemir and other DTP leaders said the incident was reminiscent of "mystery killings" carried out by government forces in the 1990s. He added that the memory of the 2005 Semdinli case, in which military intelligence officers secretly bombed a Kurdish bookstore, is still fresh in the southeast. Governor Avni Mutlu claimed that the guards may have been targeted because the PKK has been trying unsuccessfully to persuade them to refrain from actively assisting the military in its anti-PKK operations. Baydemir aide Ozsoy, however, claimed that some village guards have in fact retreated from the fighting and that the military conducted the attack to motivate other guards to rejoin the fight against the PKK.

13.(C) More neutral observers, such as free-lance journalist Yilmaz Akinci, profess uncertainty about who is responsible. Akinci noted that, on one hand the PKK has suffered serious losses the last six months (175 killed and 120 captured) so it would be understandable if a PKK unit, or the leadership, wanted to exact revenge on the village guards, who are a relatively soft target. According to some media reports, the military with support from village guards had killed a prominent PKK leader, Nazan Bayram, a week before the attack. On the other hand, he said the security forces have tightly restricted information on the incident and has kept the survivors incommunicado in a military hospital. Akinci said that whoever was responsible for the incident, the fact remains that the continued activities by both the PKK and the Turkish military, reinforce one another and he lamented the fact that wide-scale violence often erupts when progress on the political track starts to gain momentum.

Comment

14.(C) By ratcheting up violence even as the process of political dialogue) which now includes elected DTPers in parliament) gains momentum, the PKK appears intent on playing the role of spoiler. The main losers from this are DTP politicians interested in dialogue and Kurds in the southeast caught in the crossfire. While Kurds retain a healthy suspicion about the GOT, the AKP appears to be winning the benefit of the doubt by keeping its distance from the military and focusing on further democratization and economic development.

15.(C) The DTP is apparently flummoxed by the requirements of democratic politics and feels safer in its traditional role as defender and mouthpiece of the PKK. If the DTP continues to stay absent from debates on Turkey's future constitution and European aspirations, it risks pushing itself further to the margins of Turkish politics and squandering an opportunity to influence Turkey's future.

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